Intelligence Hearings Delayed;

Oversight Asked

President, Levi, Pressure Church Committee on NSA

By George Lardner, Jr.
Washington Post Staff Writer

Overriding Chairman Frank Church (D-Idaho), the Senate intelligence committee bowed to administration pressures this week and voted to postpone hearings on the supersecretive National Security Agency.

The committee decided by a vote of 6 to 4 to "defer" the hearings after a last-minute phone call from President Ford and a follow-up appearance at a closed committee meeting Tuesday by Attorney General Edward H. Levi.

A committee spokesman emphasized, however, that the committee had explicity rejected a move to drop the NSA inquiry altogether, and said that the senators still hope to reschedule the public sessions. They had originally been scheduled for yesterday and today.

The proposal to cancel the public hearings completely, it was learned, came from Sen. Barry M. Goldwater (R-Ariz.) at Tuesday's closed session. It was defeated by a vote of 5 to 4.

Lining up with Goldwater, sources said, were Sens. John G. Tower (R-Tex.), Gary W. Hart (D(D-Colo.) and Robert B. Morgan (D-N.C.).

Church, who wanted to go ahead with the inquiry on schedule, was joined on this vote by Sens. Walter F. Mondale (D-Minn.), Walter D. Huddleston (D-Ky.), Charles McC. Mathias (R-Md.) and Richard S. Schweiker (R-Pa.).

Mathias, however, then moved to "defer" the hearings, reportedly as part of an effort to make sure that no legitimate secrets would be jeopardized.

Evidently unpersuaded either by Mr. Ford's phone call or Levi's testimony, Church again voted to hold the hearings, but he was joined this time only by Mondale, Schweiker and Huddleston.

The six votes postponing the hearings, sources said, came from Mathias, Tower, Goldwater, Hart, Morgan and Sen. Howard H. Baker (R-Tenn.), who had given Tower a proxy.

Church had announced last week that a two-day round of public hearings on NSA improprieties and abuses of power would be held Oct. 8 and 9, but a spokesman for the senator said the president called Church Tuesday morning and asked that they not be held.

Mr. Ford also dispatched Levi to a closed committee meeting with a more detailed appeal, reportedly on national security grounds.

According to one source, Levi supplied the committee with no arguments or excuses it hadn't heard and considered before. Mathias, by this account, proposed deferring the hearings simply until another meeting can be arranged, this time with the President or his designee as well as Levi and Secretary of Defense James R. Schlesinger.

The most secretive of all government agencies, the NSA was created by executive order of President Eisenhower in 1955. It started within the Defense Department as a tactical and strategic intelligence-gathering operation that was presumably not supposed to spy on Americans.

SEN. FRANK CHURCH

According to the Rockefeller commission report, however, the Central Intelligence Agency's "Operation Chaos," which spied on domestic dissident groups, gave NSA a watchlist of names and received "a total of 1,100 pages of material" in return.

The Rockefeller report also disclosed that the NSA initiated an illegal CIA operation in the fall of 1973 to monitor telephone conversations between the United States and Latin America in an effort to identify foreign drug traffic.

Congressional hearings in the past have also shown that NSA officials wanted burglaries carried out to obtain the code books of foreign embassies and that the Army Security Service, an operating arm of NSA, intercepted various communications in 1968 at the Democratic National Convention.